

News Release

New Jersey Meadowlands Commission



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Ramapo College of New Jersey Awarded \$852,276 National Science Foundation Grant

*Funding will expand programming for individuals with disabilities at the
Meadowlands Environment Center*

MAHWAH - Ramapo College of New Jersey and the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission announced today that Ramapo College has received a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant in the amount of \$852,276. Ramapo will use the NSF grant to further develop, test and implement its MarshAccess program, a national model for accessibility and assistive technology that adapts science programs for people with disabilities at the NJMC's Meadowlands Environment Center.

"The need to create substantive access to informal science education opportunities for adults with disabilities and adults with age-related limitations has been identified nationally, regionally and locally," said Jean Balutanski, MEC Director of Disabilities Education and lead investigator on the grant. "MarshAccess is the MEC's solution to this demand. Program participants engage in outdoor experimental science activities centered on the New Jersey Meadowlands marsh ecosystem under the theme of *The Meadowlands Beyond the Sports Complex*."

The expanded MarshAccess program will, over the course of the three-year grant administration, identify and test appropriate assistive technologies and programmatic approaches with a goal of engaging 5,000 adults from specific disability groups in outdoor field-based experiences in order to better support their engagement, to foster their interest in science and to improve their scientific literacy.

"For most young adults and older adults with disabilities, science was an often neglected part of their K-12 education," said Angela Cristini, PhD, Executive Director of Special Programs at Ramapo College, co-principal investigator on the grant. "MarshAccess might be their first exposure to field-based science activities that will broaden understanding and give them the means to be lifelong learners."

With the funding from the National Science Foundation, MarshAccess will develop two science content-enriched, theme-based modules: “Human Impact on the Meadowlands” and “Natural and Human History of the Meadowlands.”

Each module will consist of an outdoor field experience, utilizing an accessible outdoor garden and trail led by an Environmental Educator, coupled with an extended excursion incorporating technology and hands-on lab activities to document the learning experience.

“MarshAccess ensures that the valuable environmental recovery lessons taught at the MEC are welcoming to people living with disabilities,” stated Robert Ceberio, Executive Director of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission. “We are proud to see the NSF support the expanded opportunities for public education and outreach provided through this program.”

Expanded program development will focus on identifying specific tools and approaches for engaging people with visual, hearing, mobility, mental/cognitive and age-related disabilities. Ramapo College, in partnership with the NJMC, will work with interested community organizations serving people with a variety of disabilities to assist MEC grant staff in the process of documenting MarshAccess as a model program. Data will be collected through observations, surveys and focus groups during a field testing process with groups of individuals from partners over the three years of the grant.

Upon conclusion of related field testing, the MEC will host both the regional workshop “MarshAccess = Access for All” in 2009 and the national conference “Environmental Access” in 2010. Over 100 professionals will participate in conferences and professional development around the implementation of these programmatic approaches and will create plans to implement programming in outdoor settings across the nation.

According to Victoria Madden, PhD, Project Director at the Meadowlands Environment Center and co-principal on the grant, “MarshAccess = Access for All” will focus on how regional environmental centers can engage people with disabilities through appropriate and accessible programming. “Environmental Access” will demonstrate on a national level how the programmatic approaches of MarshAccess can be implemented in other informal learning settings with diverse audiences.”

Additional grant deliverables will include: two “Marsh Mouth” multimedia kiosks at points along the outdoor trail; a set of assistive technologies for use by public audiences in both facilitated and non facilitated experiences; trail and garden self-contained materials produced in a variety of formats including standard and large print, audio and Braille; a set of program materials available to the public outlining the process and findings of the program, a MarshAccess website and a posting site for MarshAccess participants to share their experiences.

The Meadowlands Environment Center, established in 1982 by the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission as an environmental education facility, is operated by

Ramapo College of New Jersey. The MEC, its materials and programs are inclusive and accessible for individuals with disabilities, in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. For more information please visit www.njmeadowlands.gov/ec.

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